Returning as a Fulbright Scholar

In July 2001, Gábor Lente submitted his application for the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program to the Fulbright commission at the U.S. embassy in his home country of Hungary. This July – 12 months and several reviews and interviews later – he arrived in the United States for his third visit, but this time as a Fulbright Scholar.

The Fulbright Program is the U.S. government's most significant program in international educational exchange. It was proposed to the U.S. Congress in 1945 by Sen. J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, who saw the need for promoting "mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries of the world" following World War II. The program was approved by Congress and signed into law by President Truman in 1946.

Fulbright grants are made to U.S. citizens and nationals of other countries for a variety of activities, including university lecturing, advanced research, graduate study, and teaching in elementary and secondary schools.

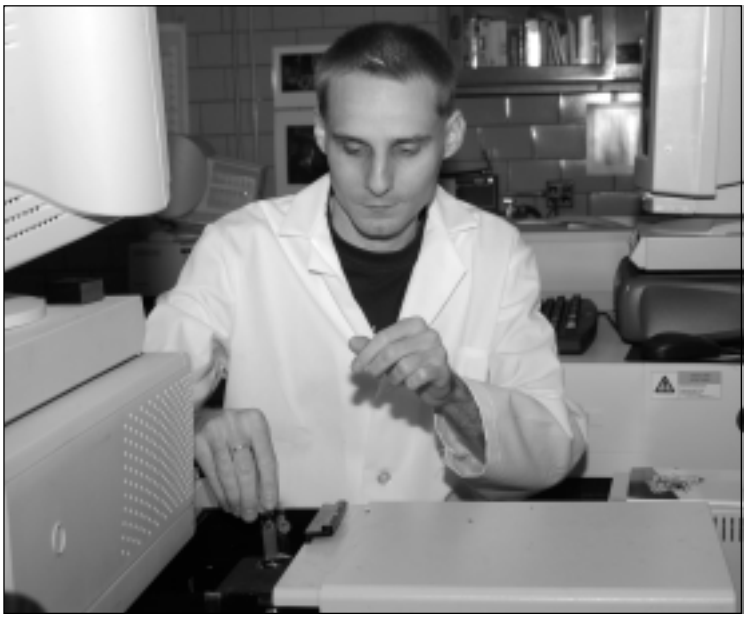
Lente is doing environmental chemistry research with Jim Espenson, a senior chemist in the Lab's Chemical and Biological Sciences Program and an Iowa State University distinguished professor. In a way, it's like coming home because Lente worked at the Lab with Espenson in 1999. He first met Espenson at the 1998 European Inorganic Reaction Mechanisms Conference held at the University of Debrecen in Hungary. "He was an invited speaker, and I was an organizer," says Lente who was working on his Ph.D. at Debrecen at that time. "He invited me to come to Ames Lab for a year as a visiting scientist. I spent all of 1999 doing research here while still a Ph.D. student at Debrecen."

Lente can tell you that applying for and becoming a Fulbright Scholar is not a simple matter. According to the information given on the Fulbright Scholar Program Web site, competition for the awards is very stiff in most countries. Somewhat amused by the mild description, Lente says, "I can confirm that the competition is very tough, at least in Hungary. Every country selects a certain number of scholars from within the country each year. I'm the only chemist from Hungary this year, so I feel lucky.

"You must apply well ahead of the time you hope to use the scholarship," Lente continues. Looking back on the process, he says, "I also had to arrange for a committee of chemists to review and give their opinions of my application, and the Fulbright Program has its own reviewers, as well." Of the people applying, Lente says half are rejected without an interview. "The other half are interviewed, and the selection process goes on," he adds.

Lente says the final decisions on which applicants would be named Fulbright Scholars were made in Hungary last December. "At the interview they told us if you receive a note before Christmas, it's usually positive – after Christmas, it's usually negative. I received a note one day before Christmas," he says, with a sound of relief in his voice even now.

The final confirmation for Fulbright Scholars is made in Washington, D.C. "I received my confirmation in mid April," says Lente, who flew to the United States on July 30 – a whole year after he initially filed his application. Lente will be at Ames Laboratory for a full year, five months of which will be supported by the Fulbright Scholarship. "The Fulbright is a case of cosponsorship, so I'll be supported by Jim Espenson for the remaining seven months," says Lente, who adds that he'll be returning to his position at Debrecen when the year is up.



Gábor Lente places a sample into the spectrophotometer. The instrument measures the light absorption of a sample and provides data on the identity and amount of compounds present in the cell. Lente's research may lead to the discovery of better catalysts for the development of water purification techniques.

Although you wouldn't know it to visit with him, Lente says one of the most difficult tasks he's encountered since he arrived in the U.S. and at Ames Lab is speaking in English. "Few people realize that Hungarian is not a European language, but it is as far from English as Chinese," he says. "For example, in Hungarian we don't distinguish between he and she — that's why I mix up personal pronouns, because I don't think in those terms. We have the same word, regardless. If I want to use a personal pronoun, it doesn't depend on gender."

While earning his Ph.D. in chemistry, Lente also became a Hungarian-English translator, but says he's finding out that "translation has not much to do with speaking." He admits that he still thinks in his own language when he's doing research, but says, "I'm trying very hard to avoid translating within myself and just react in English. It's very hard to do and takes a lot of experience."

While at the Lab, Lente will be working with Espenson to develop methods for water purification. "Certain substances in industrial sewage are very toxic, and we need to get rid of those," he says. "I'm trying to work on methods to do that." He explains that the catalyst is the main focus in developing the water purification techniques. "We would like to find very good catalysts and learn how they work so we can design even better catalysts," he says. ■

~ Saren Johnston